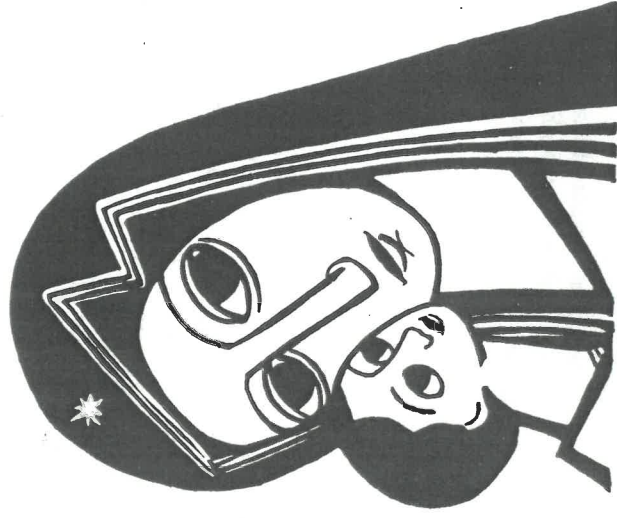


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THE VENERATION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY IN THE CHURCH

PRIOR TO THE
COUNCIL OF EPHESUS AD 431

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The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary
11, Belmont Road, Wallington Surrey SM6 8TE
September 1997

ISBN 1 869927 26 5

The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a Registered Charity no 282748

Printed by Patchment (Oxford) Ltd., Printworks, Crescent Road, Cowley, Oxford OX4 2PB
from customers originals supplied

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ISBN 1 869927 26 5

THE VENERATION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY IN THE CHURCH PRIOR TO THE COUNCIL OF EPHESUS AD 431

Marie T Farrell rsm

Conventional Christian wisdom has invariably pointed to the Council of Ephesus (AD 431) as the great starburst for inaugurating the cult of the Mother of Jesus in the early Church. Certainly, following upon the official proclamation of Mary as *Theotokos* by this council, there was an exponential increase in what can rightly be called 'cultic' activities focusing upon the person of Mary. Churches were dedicated to her in almost all important cities, Marian feasts began to proliferate and sermons lavishly adorned with Old Testament images became a popular genre for extolling Mary as the God-bearer.¹

My aim in this paper is to take some 'soundings' on how the memory and the role of Mary developed in Christian communities from New Testament times until AD 431 – a memory which was both preserved and

treasured within a developing Christian culture and which reached a great groundswell with the Council of Ephesus. In the Western church, the post-Vatican II recovery of the roots of Marian theology and devotion is recognised as being essential to any contemporary hermeneutical approaches to the Mother of Jesus Christ. Given contemporary efforts among certain proponents of the New Age Movement to reinstate a Goddess cult² and to afford Mary the status of 'divine woman', it is important and topical to examine the foundations from which Christian veneration of Mary has flourished.

Mary in the Scriptures

Since an authentic Christian spirituality must rest upon a sound theological base to prevent its becoming mere sentimentalism or superstition, it follows that the roots of Marian devotion must originate within the sacred scriptures – not in express doctrinal statements, nor in a manner by which conclusions are contained within premises, but as something signified is contained in a sign.³ Mary's presence in the scriptures belongs to that broad notion of sacramentality whereby God uses human persons and their witness to communicate his saving power and grace.⁴

Whether or not Marian devotion was initially stimulated by a distinct oral tradition or by a Christianising of mother-goddess cults, meditation on the sacred scriptures was surely of primal importance in revealing to the faithful the significance of Mary in salvation history.⁵

The New Testament writings reveal virtually nothing about the historical mother of Jesus. As we know, they are post-resurrection christological and ecclesial documents. Their primary concern is to elicit faith in Jesus as the Christ who has witnessed to the *economia* of the God of the First Covenant and brought it to fulfilment through his incarnation, mission, passion and death, his resurrection and exaltation 'at God's right hand' from whence his Spirit has been released and his Church come to birth – a Church which would remember and prolong his presence in word and sacrament for all succeeding ages.

What the New Testament does do (and in tandem with Old Testament revelation which has been described as providing 'mother soil' for substantially 99 per cent of its own revelation⁶), is to demonstrate progressively through the synoptic and into the Johannine tradition, that the mother of Jesus is inextricably involved in the incarnation, life and mission of Jesus and in the birth of the Church.

For our purposes today, Bertrand Buby's artistic metaphors of Marian references in the New Testament are useful.⁷

In Pauline writings, with especial affirmation of Jesus' human origins from a Jewish woman (Gal. 4.4) Mary is but a 'whisper'.

In the Gospel of Mark from the pericope with apparently negative connotations of the appearance of the mother of Jesus in Mark 3.31-35, and in her being named in Mark 6.3, Mary is presented briefly as a 'silhouette'.

Matthew's interest in the genealogical origins (Matt. 1.1-17) and virginal conception of Jesus (Matt. 1.18-25), his focus on the mother and child in the Magi pericope (Matt. 2.11) and his removal of the disconcerting intimations of the Markan appearance of Mary in the public ministry narrative (Matt. 13.54-58), serve to convert Mark's 'silhouette' into a 'pencil sketch'.

The Lukan scriptures present us with a rich oil-canvas or 'portrait' of Mary. Here is the mother-disciple whose 'fiat' has made possible the virginal conception of Jesus (Luke 1.26-38), whose visit to Elizabeth has occasioned the *Magnificat*, that never-to-be-equalled hymn of joy and praise on behalf of all 'little ones' who have been overwhelmed by the saving deeds of Yahweh (Luke 1.39-45). Luke's 'portrait' reveals a Mary who has brought Jesus to birth (Luke 2.1-7), welcomed the adoration of shepherds (Luke 1.8-20), presented him in the Temple for circumcision and naming according to Jewish ritual (Luke 2.21-40), who has been with him through adolescence (Luke 2.41-52), accompanied him as pre-eminent disciple during the public ministry (Luke 8.19-21) and who at Pentecost (Acts 1.12-14) 'entered into the mystery of the glory of the Risen Lord who is ever faithful to his promises'.⁸

The Gospel of John gives a fine 'sculpture' of Mary. More so than in the Lukan synoptic tradition, the themes of faith and love dominate. Two major pericopes – that of Cana (John 2.1-12) in which the figure of the Woman catalyses the inauguration of Jesus' Hour, and that of the scene on Calvary (John 19.25-28a) where the Woman stands at the foot of the Cross with the Beloved Disciple – highlight the symbolic role of the Mother of Jesus. The fourth gospel realises a trajectory commenced in the first, namely, that Mary, the Mother-Disciple is to be found at the heart of the eschatological family of Jesus.

From Scriptural Tradition to Expressions of Marian Veneration

In Praise of Mary

From the first, Christian veneration of the Mother of God was expressed entirely within a christological context inspired by the gospel tradition.

Ancient prayers and religious representations which refer to Mary do so initially in terms praising her for her role in the mystery of salvation. Prayer of invocation developed gradually from prayer of praise.

The scriptural tradition of Mary's virgin motherhood very quickly became the focus of theological reflection in the post-apostolic Church. Ignatius of Antioch clearly affirmed Mary's virginity and explicitly recognised her place in the whole mystery of salvation:

For our God, Jesus Christ, was conceived by Mary in accord with God's plan: of the seed of David, it is true, but also of the Holy Spirit ... The virginity of Mary, her giving birth, and also the death of the Lord, were hidden from the prince of this world – three mysteries loudly proclaimed, but wrought in the silence of God (*Ephesians* 18.2; 19.1).⁹

Justin (d. c. 165), Irenaeus (d. c. 193) and Tertullian (d. c. 220) all developed the parallel drawn by Paul (e.g. in Rom. 15.12-21) between Adam and Christ as the New Adam. In doing so they advanced an analogous parallel between Mary and Eve. Theological development of Mary's role in salvation history led naturally to her being praised in the Church; the favour with which she was graced was continually recalled for the faithful in the ancient baptismal creed where it was acknowledged that Jesus 'was born of the virgin Mary'.

A typical example of veneration of Mary by praise for what God had done in her comes from a section of Ode 19 of the *Sibylline Oracles*. An example from apocryphal literature is chosen because, in their own way, works such as the *Odes of Solomon*, the *Ascension of Isaiah*, the *Sibylline Oracles* and the *Protevangelium of James*, all of which began to circulate from late first to mid-second century, offered popular praise to the mother of Jesus insofar as they sought to edify and, by satisfying the reverent curiosity of the faithful, met a psychological need for filling out Marian detail lacking in the gospels. Apocryphal elaboration extended the aura of mystery surrounding the infancy gospel narratives and, especially with regard to Mary's virginity, it injected the miraculous in generous measure.¹⁰

He came from heaven
took mortal form.

To Gabriel was first revealed

the one most chaste and true;

Thus spoke the archangel

to the maiden:

'Receive, O Virgin,

the Lord in your immaculate womb'.

At these words
the Lord gave grace to her
who was to be forever Virgin.
She, to hear these words,
was filled with wonder and with dread.
In stillness she stood trembling,
bewildered, as one lost,
the while her heart did throb
to hear the wondrous news.
Then jumped her heart for joy
to find comfort in those words...
heart filled with gentle modesty
and courage came again
and soared the Word within her womb.
He would in time be flesh
and taking life within the womb
assume the form of mortal man
and be born a child, a child of virgin birth.
This is a great marvel for humankind.
But nothing is too great
for God the Father, God the Son.
For the new-born babe
the joyous globe bore wings,
the heavens smiled and the universe rejoiced ...

A prayer found on a potsherd in the ruins of a 3rd century Coptic monastery demonstrates how ancient praise of Mary has invariably been derived from the Lukan annunciation narrative:

Hail Mary,
full of grace;
the Lord is with you,
the Holy Spirit too.
Your priests shall be robed in justice;
they that honour you shall rejoice and exult.
For David's sake, your servant, Lord,
save, Lord, your people,
bless your chosen portion.
Hail to the glorious Virgin
Mary, full of grace.
The Lord is with you.
Blessed are you above all other women
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

for he you conceived was Christ
the Son of God,
and he has redeemed our souls.

Allusion to the priests here is of interest, for it suggests that this is an example of an early liturgical prayer which echoes psalm texts as well as indicating a prelude to the Hail Mary.¹²

Precise chronology of the pre-431 liturgical praise of Mary is difficult to attain, but liturgical hymns of St Ephrem the Syrian (c.306-373) must surely rival any others in the beauty and delicacy of their praise of Mary. The listening ear will undoubtedly catch the scriptural allusions in the following excerpts from Sebastian Brock's collection, *The Harp of the Spirit*:

Come, all you who have discernment, let us wonder
at the virgin mother, David's daughter.
Herself most fair, to the Wonderful she gave birth;
she is the spring that provides the Fountain,
she the ship that bears joy from the Father,
that carries good news in her pure womb;
she took on board and escorts
the great Steersman of creation
through whom peace reigns
on earth and in heaven.

Come, let us wonder at the virgin most pure
wondrous in herself,
unique in creation,
she gave birth, yet knew not man;
her pure soul with wonder was filled,
daily her mind gave praise
in joy at the twofold wonder:
her virginity preserved,
her child most dear.
Blessed is He who shone forth from her!

A young dove, she carried
the eagle, the Ancient of days,
singing praise as she carried Him
in her lovely songs:
'O my Son, most rich, in a tiny nest
You have chosen to grow; melodious harp,
You are silent like a child, please let me sing to You
with the lyre whose chords stir the cherubim...'¹³

Ephrem's hymns for celebration of the Feast of the Nativity of Christ likewise celebrate the Blessed Virgin as this stanza shows:

This day Mary has become for us
the heaven that bears God,
for in her the exalted Godhead
has descended and dwelt;
in her It has grown small
to make us great
– but Its nature does not diminish;
in her It has woven us a garment
that shall be for our salvation...¹⁴

The sublimity of Ephrem's liturgical thought linking the Holy Spirit, the Eucharist, the Church and Mary is magnificently expressed in his Hymn of Faith no. 10:

There is fire and Spirit in Mary's womb;
there is fire and Spirit in the river in which you were baptised.
Fire and Spirit in our own baptism,
in the bread and in the cup, fire and the Holy Spirit.¹⁵

It is not possible to consider here in any detail the manner in which veneration of Mary appeared within early eucharistic liturgies. However, we note, in passing, that the first record of her presence in the eucharistic canon was in the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus about AD 215. In the East, the ancient Greek liturgies of St Mark and St James (late 4th – early 5th century) both remember Mary.

The liturgy of St. James sings her praises thus:

Truly it is becoming to bless you, the God-bearing, the ever blessed and all-blameless, and mother of our God, more honourable than the cherubim, and incomparably more glorious than the seraphim: you who didst bear with purity, God the Word, you the true God-mother, we magnify. In you, highly favoured, all creation rejoices, the host of angels and the human race: hallowed temple and spiritual paradise, pride of virgins, of whom God was made flesh and our God, who was before all eternity, became a little child: for he made your womb his throne and your belly broader than the heavens. In these, O highly favoured One, all creation rejoices: glory unto you.¹⁷

Development of the idea of explicitly praising the holiness of Mary apparently began with Origen (c. 260 – c. 340); it was his disciple Eusebius who gave Mary the title *Panagia* 'because she had a share in the Holy Spirit'.¹⁸ Epiphanius (c. 315 – 403) extolled Mary as *Hagia Maria*, but because of the

context of the female Collyridian cult of decorating a Marian throne and making bread offerings to Mary as Great Mother, he was most careful to distinguish divine worship from veneration of Mary.¹⁹ On the whole, Mary's holiness was not generally associated with sinlessness – quite the contrary, in fact. Presumably, in order to remind the people that she was very much one of us, and in keeping with a patristic 'mariology from below', Mary's alleged 'failings' were discussed among the Eastern theologians including Irenaeus and Cyril of Alexandria. John Chrysostom actually preached about the flaws in Mary's character.²⁰ In the West, it was Ambrose (339 – 397) who is credited with being first to teach the integral holiness of Mary. The doctrine of her personal sinlessness was subsequently taught emphatically by his disciple Augustine and, as we know, after Duns Scotus, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was eventually to develop in the West until its official definition as dogma in 1950.

In taking pre-Ephesian 'soundings' of Marian veneration in the mode of praise, it is important to make some specific reference to Athanasius of Alexandria and to Augustine of Hippo.

St Athanasius (c. 295 – 373) is of particular interest since his theological reflections in the context of controversy with a group of 'Neo-Arians' were constantly referenced against the prayer and liturgical practice of his community.

In supporting the full humanity of Jesus, Athanasius insisted that the divine Logos was born of the Virgin Mary, the *Theotokos* – the title used among orthodox Christians of Alexandria in public prayer and, apparently, introduced there by the previous bishop, Alexander, c. 319, in an encyclical against the Arians.²¹ Athanasius relied on the normative content of Christian devotion in using a festal commemoration of Mary²² to vindicate the orthodoxy of his doctrine – namely, that the motherhood of Mary was not only important ecclesially as a past event, but a guarantee for belief in the humanity of Jesus and, therefore, essential for the ongoing working-out of their salvation and growth in holiness by Christians in the present. In the *Epistle to Epictetus* he writes: 'For if the Logos is of one essence with the body, the commemoration and the office of Mary are superfluous'.²³ In other words, it would be pointless to celebrate the Blessed Virgin in a liturgical festival if she were not integral to the saving mystery of Christ.

Jaroslav Pelikan claims that Athanasius' fullest exposition of mariological teaching is given in the *Letter to the Virgins* where he exhorts the nuns to learn to know themselves through Mary as through a mirror. This 'obverse' method of theologising is assessed well by Pelikan:

Whatever were the distinguishing characteristics of the Christian virgin who had been devoted to Christ, [these] ought to have been even more distinctive of the character of the one who was privileged to be the Virgin Mother of God.²⁴

A particular significance of Augustine (354 – 400) lies in his emphasis on the faith of Mary. Augustine's sermons for the feast of Christmas stress above all that it was by her obedient faith that Mary was able to open herself to physical motherhood of the Word. Thus Mary deserves praise for having conceived Christ by faith in her heart and mind before conceiving him physically in her womb.

While the angel announced Christ's birth, Mary conceived him. Believing the news concerning his birth, Mary conceived him by faith. The advent of faith into the Virgin's heart was followed by her fruitfulness of womb as mother.²⁵

For Augustine, Mary's blessedness by virtue of her faith and motherhood is a profound ecclesial mystery. Mary is to be praised within the Church as its holiest member. Using the context of Luke 11.27 in which an anonymous woman from the crowd cried out in praise of Mary's motherhood, Augustine taught that:

... Mary is blessed because she heard the word of God and kept it. Her mind was filled more fully with Truth than her womb by his flesh ... Christ is the Truth in Mary's mind, Christ made flesh in her womb. Greater is that in her mind than that which she carried in her womb. Mary is holy. Mary is blessed. Yet the Church is greater than she is. What reason do I bring? Mary is part of the Church; she is the holy member; she is the member above all members ... My people listen very closely: You are members of Christ's body and you are the body of Christ. And this is how you are when he said: 'Here are my mother and my brethren' ... He goes on: 'Whoever hears and whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister and my mother'.²⁶

The praise of Mary in visual images

Catacomb art at least from the early third century illustrates how the memory of Mary within the Christ-Event was preserved and celebrated. The Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome (early 3rd Century) has three frescoes of note. The most ancient one, part of a larger stucco of the Good Shepherd, depicts Mary with the child at her breast. As though hearing a voice, the child's head is turned towards a prophet carrying a scroll in his left hand and pointing with his right to a star above the child. Common consensus is that the figure pointing to the star is the prophet Balaam who foretold that 'a star shall come forth out of Jacob and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel' (Num. 24.17).²⁷

A second fresco whose motif is the Adoration of the Magi, shows Mary presenting Christ to the Gentiles.²⁸ A third represents a female Orans standing between a Bishop-Velatio with his assistant and an enthroned Mother and Child. The newly consecrated virgin is being presented to Mary as a model of imitation.²⁹

The catacomb of SS Peter and Marcellinus contains a late 3rd century fresco of Mary clothed as an elegant Roman matron enthroned between two Magi.³⁰ What remains of a quite beautiful bust of the Madonna with hands in the Orans position and dated as early 4th century, is found in the catacomb of Maius.³¹

Funerary and reliquary art frequently take up the motif of Mary's presentation of the Christ-Child to the Magi. A well preserved example is seen in the Roman sarcophagus of Clipeus which has been dated AD 315. This is an especially interesting sarcophagus in that the usual model in the Graeco-Roman world portrayed an enthroned emperor or general receiving a golden wreath as a sign of submission from barbarians vanquished in battle. Instead, Mary is enthroned, with the Christ-child replacing the emperor. It is the Child who is receiving gifts from the Magi who have become the defeated barbarians.³²

Visual praise of Mary has been revealed through archaeological discoveries between 1955 and 1960 by a team working under the direction of Frs Bagatti and Testa in Nazareth. Among the recoveries has been a late 2nd or early 3rd century rather clumsy graffito on the base of a column. The letters XE MAPIA are able to be distinguished as the angelic salutation in Greek (chairè Maria).³³ Pre-dating all of these examples honouring Mary as Virgin Mother of Jesus is an image which is venerated still in the first-century Syriac Church (claimed to be on the site of the house of John Mark) in the Old City of Jerusalem. Documentation exists here to substantiate the claim that carbon-dating supports a first-century date for this icon. Popular devotion assigns the painting to St Luke.

Invocation to Mary

Prior to the Council of Ephesus there is but slender evidence of Christian reliance upon the intercessory power of Mary. Nevertheless prayer to Mary as Advocate may be demonstrated.

The earliest extant prayer (on papyrus dated 3rd century) which was addressed to Mary in invocation is preserved in the John Rylands library of Manchester. The oldest form of the prayer, which later became popular as the

Sub tuum praesidium, is rendered as:

Sheltered by your mercy, we take refuge in you, O holy Mother of God; do not lead those who pray to you into temptation, but always deliver us from danger, you who alone are chaste and blessed.³⁴

The Bagatti and Testa excavations at Nazareth have uncovered evidence of an ancient Church-Synagogue beneath the site of the present basilica and, like it, also linked to the memory of the Annunciation. An inscription, partially preserved, has been reconstructed to read:

[prostrate] under the holy site of M[ary]
I have immediately written [the names...]
I have fulfilled all my duties towards her
(or: I have adorned her image as best I could).³⁵

Fr P. Testa comments:

Who wrote this inscription and what does it mean? It was probably written by a woman pilgrim of the 2nd or 3rd century who came to kneel down, there, in a sanctuary dedicated to a holy Woman of Nazareth whose name began with the letter M. In order to gain her intercession, she undoubtedly wrote on the surface of the wall her names and the names of her family. She expressed, moreover, her devotion, either by prescribed rites and prayers or by adorning, religiously, the image of the saint venerated. In this respect, the Greek text could mean one or the other. The custom of writing names of the ones we hold dear is not new. In the pre-Byzantine graffiti we find several Judaeo-Christian names left by pilgrims ... The good woman must have done the same thing at Nazareth, commending her family to the Virgin. There is scarcely any doubt that Mary was the object of this act of worship. This is obviously the question of a woman saint (the feminine pronoun proves this) and the first letter of her name which is the only one preserved is very suggestive.³⁶

The earliest version of the Assumption apocrypha from the Ethiopian *Book of Rest* (possibly 3rd century) records a prayer of invocation for those who interrupted Mary's funeral procession and who were punished for trying to desecrate her body. The text reads:

Mary, we implore you, Mary, Light and mother of lights, Mary, life and mother of apostles, Mary, golden light, you who bear every true lamp, Mary, our mistress and Mother of our Lord, Mary, our Queen, beg of your Son that He allow us a little rest.³⁷

There is evidence that Mary was mentioned by name as an intercessor in the eucharistic liturgy of Syria in the early 4th century.³⁸ By mid-4th century

her name was included in the *communicantes* of the Roman liturgy where her memory was celebrated within the communion of saints so that the faithful could lay claim to their merits and prayers.³⁹

A Christmas homily of Augustine includes a delicate invocation to Mary:

Nourish us, O Mother, with our nourishment. Nourish us with the bread which has come down from Heaven, to lie in the manger, like the pittance of the beasts so recollected ...⁴⁰

There is some indication of veneration in the mode of invocation at early shrines of Mary. A mid-4th century image of Coptic art engraved in limestone depicts the Virgin Mary suckling the infant Jesus. The graceful design is believed to represent a Christianising of the goddess Isis suckling Horus.⁴¹

A final example of devotion to Mary by way of invocation has been discovered in a subterranean sanctuary in Alexandria. A fresco there which has been dated as 3rd century, represents the marriage feast of Cana (John 2.1-11). The mother of Jesus is portrayed as speaking to the servants.⁴² Perhaps the ancient artist understood the effectiveness of the prayer of Mary on behalf of an embarrassed bride and bridegroom and, in the execution of the work, expressed his own need.

Conclusion

As selective as these 'soundings' have been, it is clear that the honour paid to Mary at the Council of Ephesus did not emerge *in vacuo*; nor can the thought be entertained that Marian veneration before AD 431 was merely rudimentary. A flowering of what had developed prior to the Council is given expression in the famous hymn-homily marking the occasion of the declaration of Mary as *Theotokos*. Excerpts are used to conclude these reflections. While scholarly debate still surrounds its authorship, the hymn itself attests to the fact that the writer is someone who had indeed appropriated a precious tradition and whose praise for the Mother of God had sprung from a profound and heartfelt veneration:

Hail, O Trinity, holy and mystical, in answer to whose call we have all assembled in this church of Mary, the mother of God.

Hail Mary, Mother of God
the whole world's treasure, commanding its reverence,
lamp that will never cease to burn,
crowning glory of the virgin state,
mainstay of orthodox faith,
temple that none can demolish,

place that encompasses him whom no place encompasses,
both mother and virgin.

Thanks to you, he that comes in the name of the Lord is called blessed in the
holy gospels ...

Thanks to you, the Trinity is glorified and the Cross called precious and
given honour throughout the world ...

Thanks to you, the heavens rejoice ...

Thanks to you the whole creation came to the knowledge of the truth ...

Thanks to you ... pagan peoples are on their way to conversion ... and God's
only Son has shed His light on them that were living in darkness, in the
shadow of death.

Thanks to you, the prophets prophesied and the apostles preached salvation
to the Gentiles.

Thanks to you, the dead return to life and kings govern their people for the
sake of the Holy Trinity.

Much praised is Mary, but what human tongue can adequately declare her
worth: She is a mother and she is still a virgin. The wonder of it dazes me.
And yet, whoever heard of an architect who built a temple and was
forbidden to enter it? Who can claim to be slighted if God calls his servant
to be his mother?

The whole world therefore rejoices.⁴³

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- 3 P. Edward D. O'Connor, 'The Function of Signs in the Biblical Doctrine on Mary', *Acta Congressus Mariologici-Mariani Lisbon-Fátima MCMLXVII*, Vol. 2 (Rome, 1970), p. 70.
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- 19 *ibid.* pp. 72-73; see also O'Carroll, *Theotokos*, pp. 134-135.
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- 21 See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine: Some Historical Prolegomena* (New Haven, 1969), pp. 95-119.
- 22 Possibly a Marian festival held on the Sunday before Christmas - cf. Graef, *Mary*, p. 133.
- 23 Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine*, p. 101.